

ONE DAY

This year, The Vietnam Medical Assistance Program (“VNMAP”) selected Lam Dong, a province in the Western Highland, as its site for examining and treating patients. Each day our team worked in a different commune: one day in Lam Ha, another day in Gan Reo, then Darahoa, or Gia Lam, etc., but to me (and perhaps to most members of the group) our day of work (June 19, 2009) at Luc Hoa Orphanage in Dinh An is the most unforgettable one.

Behind Bì Ngạn wooden bridge is Nguyen Khong Pagoda. “Bì Ngạn” means “The Other or Different Bank of the River.” The name of the bridge implies that people who visit the pagoda, passing this bridge, will awaken to the Buddha’s teachings and will see a different world, a different “river bank” which is much better and happier than the illusory “river bank” of the world they formerly saw. I don’t know if this was caused by natural erosion from rain and sunshine or whether someone intentionally erased one letter and changed an accent to deface the sign, but the name on the sign over the bridge had somehow been changed to “Bì Nạn” (“Got into an Accident”)! Past the pagoda is Luc Hoa Orphanage. When we arrived, patients of all ages from the commune and the nearby neighborhood were waiting in patience and in silence. Buddhist Nun Superior Tam Hanh and her disciples as well as the orphans from three to fifteen years of age here welcomed us with happy expressions and friendly smiles.

The front yard and some rooms of the orphanage were used as our medical site. After arranging medicines and setting up tables and chairs for examinations, we began our work. Our team that day consisted of doctors in our group, Dr. Nguyen Ngoc Lien together with some people from the Lam Dong Red Cross who volunteered to help us, a pharmacist, and medical students and translators. Before patients came to see us, their blood pressure levels were taken by Hoang, Van Anh, or Uyen (people from the Lam Dong Red Cross) and they were asked a few questions to see whether they had diabetes, hypertension, hepatitis B or other chronic diseases. Most patients were ethnic K’Ho, many of whom could not speak Vietnamese very well. One example: the examination of one patient, we found the word “diabetes” was checked on the patient’s form (in Vietnamese we call this disease “tieu duong,” “tieu = urinate” and “duong” = sugar; “duong” is also a homonym of “street”). With caution, the doctor for whom I was translating that day told me to ask the patient more questions to elicit additional information about the patient's disease so that he could appropriately prescribe for this patient.

I asked:

- Do you have diabetes?

He replied (without standard accents, the way the K’Ho pronounce the Vietnamese language)

- Yes!

I continued:

- So what are your blood sugar readings before and after meals?

- I don’t know.

- Did you go to see your doctor?
- No!
- You did not see any doctors, nor do you know your blood sugar levels. So how come you know that you have "diabetes" ("tieu duong")?
- I did not have a place to urinate at home so I "urinated" in the "street"; that's how I know I have "tieu duong"!

Oh! This man understood "diabetes" as "urinate in the street"! No wonder this patient and many other ethnic people checked the box on their "Patient Intake Form" saying that they have "tieu duong"!

In another case, I told a patient, "The doctor said you have hypertension." She seemed not to understand me, so I used more simple words, "Your blood pressure is high." In Vietnamese both "high" and "tall" are expressed as "cao," so another way to say "high blood pressure" is "cao mau"; if translated word by word, it might sound like "tall blood.") She looked at me and the doctor with skeptical eyes; I gave her a friendly look to encourage her to ask us more questions. After some hesitation, she said to us: "I don't know if the doctor was right to say that I have 'tall blood' because I am this short, how can my blood be tall?"

This was the "experience" we "transmitted" to each others' ears when we asked patients about "diabetes." Finally we came to a "solution": We would ask "if they saw any ants coming to their urine" and we would hear an exact answer. We also spent more time on explaining the meaning of "hypertension" and guiding them on their daily diet for their blood pressure to be more stable.

In the afternoon, delicious vegetarian food was served with sweet starfruit (carambola) and jackfruit for dessert. The food was all homemade; even the fruit came from a tree growing in the orphanage yard. It was a lot of fun when on our break some of us climbed the tree; some used a long stick to pick the golden, sweet starfruit! The tree is really high, laden with ripened fruit. The children eagerly brought us plastic bags or baskets to help gather the fresh starfruits. Delight radiated from those little ones' faces!

That day more than 200 patients were examined, treated for common acute diseases and given medications that our group had brought with us. We finished working quite early that day. Leader of VNMAP, KhoiNguyen Nguyen, offered a little sum of money to the Buddhist Nun (with the hope we could "compensate" her for the cost of buying food and for cooking for us); nevertheless, she did not accept because "most of you are students who have traveled from the other half of this planet to come here, sacrificing your time, effort and money to come help the sick and the poor. I recorded here your good will but money I could not accept!" KhoiNguyen persisted at length in his efforts to persuade her and finally she accepted the money "to help the people who are poorer and in more urgent need." Then she showed us around the orphanage. All the furniture here was simple, clean and in neat order. Before saying goodbye to us, she invited us to enjoy the dancing and singing performance of the "little actors and actresses." They passionately performed

one song after another. All the songs were so nice. Let's "listen" to Hanh Khai (wishes to be a singer when she grows up), who is going to "sing" for us the song "Let's look at each other in the eyes!"

"I invite you, my older brothers, older sisters, younger brothers and sisters,

Let's come here to hold hands.

This is a place there is no more anger or sadness,

This is a place that had room for nothing but smiles,

This is a place that had room for nothing but kindheartedness

Let's look at each other in the eyes!

We will find overwhelming compassion for humankind,

Now look at each other in the eyes,

You will find sweetness of human love.

Let's look at each other in the eyes!

Let's look at each other in the eyes!"

Yes, this was a place where only kindheartedness and overwhelming compassion for humankind could be conceived! Let us open our hearts, sharing with one another the fond gaze and human warmth, to relieve some of the pain in our sick bodies. Is this not what VNMAP is trying to do, to ease the pain of the poor who could not afford even one visit to a doctor? I still remember the day when several doctors in the mission were driven on motorcycles to a remote village to examine a patient who was unable to come to our workplace. After examining the patient who "had never met a doctor in his life before," and realizing that he was destitute, the doctors gave the sick man all the money they had in their pockets that day. Some doctors made personal sacrifices in order to ensure that our patients received the medications they needed. How about the medical students, pharmacy students and other volunteers? Before the trip, they had to do lots of activities for fundraising and sacrificed their time and tight budgets to buy plane tickets to travel to Vietnam for this mission; once in Vietnam, they performed their duties while enduring environmental pollution, changing weather, and the lack of hygienic conditions. And who else? The donors and other volunteers, who kindly made their contributions of money, time, and support of various kinds such as advising, advertising, serving as singing contest judges, etc. at our fundraisers to support VNMAP's noble goals. Without the help of these supporters, I wonder if any members of VNMAP could have attained their accomplishments. No words can describe fully the beauty of the benefactors' silent sacrifice for VNMAP, especially during this time of such worrisome economic problems!

Then came the time we had to leave this orphanage even though we wanted to stay longer. One medical student in our team, trying to hide her tears when listening to the stories of the orphans here, handed me some money in an envelope and asked me to give it to the Buddhist nun to help the children. The languages we speak are different, but the language that comes from the heart and human love seems not to have individual voices. Never will I forget the image of my friend hugging some children so tightly sobbing as I translated the kids telling her they wished to be medical doctors when they grew up to come and examine for the poor and the needy in remote areas like this. We tried to stay as long as we could with these lovable orphans. Perhaps under very difficult circumstances, their mothers had had to abandon them, bringing misery to their innocent lives. One of my group mates asked me, "If there was a mistake for a woman to have a baby by accident or out of wedlock, then it should be only one time of 'accident.' Why did I see two

siblings, one who is only a few years younger than the other, then both of them became orphans in here, may I ask you?" I could not answer my young friend's question. Perhaps love may have its own ways of reasoning everything, but I just wished to see no children, results of love, to become orphans, victims of all the burden, unhappiness and misery!

Twenty-one of the children did not want us to part from them, so they followed us out to the main street. As I watched their tiny feet tottering on the gravel path, I silently prayed to God that their futures might be safe, unlike their unsteady steps, and that their aspirations--to become doctors, pharmacists, singers, Buddhist monks or nuns--might come true.

Then our bus rolled away leaving behind the calm mountainside. We came back to our hotel, had dinner and then went for meetings, packed medication, rested to prepare to leave at 6a.m. the following day to start our work at a different location. The sun went down so hurriedly on this high plateau. Everything was covered with darkness very quickly, but the shiny eyes full of hope and overflowing gratitude for what we had done seemed to follow us throughout the rest of our journey. These eyes urged us to put more efforts to our noble goals of helping the sick and strengthened our courage to come back some day in the very near future.

Maryland, 7/26/2009

To my dear fellow VNMAP members and to our much-appreciated benefactors of VNMAP
MinhVan T. Tran